

Helmich Pleads Guilty to Conspiracy in Spy Trial

JACKSONVILLE, Fla., Sept. 28 (UPI)—Joseph George Helmich Jr., accused of spying for the Soviet Union, pleaded guilty today to one count of conspiracy in the midst of his federal espionage trial.

The surprise announcement of the plea agreement came a few minutes before 1 p.m. on the heels of a morning of closed-door negotiations between Helmich's lawyer, Peter M. Dearing, and U.S. Attorney Gary Betz.

Court authorities said the government agreed to drop the remaining charges that Helmich sold Soviet agents a maintenance manual, technical details about parts and key lists for the KL7 cryptosystem, a top secret U.S. Army coding machine.

Helmich was asked by U.S. District Court Judge Susan H. Black if he was under treatment by a psychiatrist or under the influence of drugs. He answered "no" to both. She also asked if he had consulted sufficiently with his lawyer about his decision to change his plea and he responded affirmatively.

Black set sentencing for 9 a.m. next Monday.

After announcing the plea, Betz read the conspiracy count and asked Helmich if he had any objections. Helmich did, taking exception to the government's charge that the conspiracy had continued beyond 1964 until 1980.

Asked whether the conspiracy involved more than one person, Helmich said: "Yes, but not with citizens of the United States other than myself.

"No one held a gun to my head," he said. "There was a lot of psychological pressure."

Helmich, 44, was charged with selling top secret technical information about the KL7 to the Soviets for \$131,000.

Prosecutors had alleged that mounting debts prompted Helmich to betray his country while

working in a U.S. military communications center in Paris in 1963-64.

Testimony about the KL7 revealed few details about the inner workings of the machine, which is still used by American and allied forces around the world to code military and embassy communications.

The machine resembles a small electric typewriter, but with a twist: When the key for a letter is struck, a different letter is printed. A clear message is typed in, a seeming garble comes out on a thin strip of gummed paper.

A dozen gear-like rotors sit in the heart of the machine, each with about 20 possible settings. The result is more than four quadrillion ways to write the same message.

Design of the rotors is changed at least annually, rendering any machine without new rotors obsolete.